



Process and results of collective evaluations of participatory and multilevel interventions in four SMEs

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PROCESS AND RESULTS OF COLLECTIVE EVALUATIONS OF PARTICIPATORY AND MULTILEVEL INTERVENTIONS IN FOUR SMES (IT AND MANUFACTURING)

Introduction

In a two-year mixed-methods project “Productivity and Well-being in knowledge intensive SMEs” running from September 2011 to August 2013 the overall aim is to develop an operational model which SMEs can use when they want to initiate participatory primary stress management interventions in their company based on in-house resources and competences. The idea of a Programme Theory and continuous evaluation is an integrated part of the research design.

The growing appreciation of participatory workplace interventions regarding work-related stress has revealed a need for evaluating the effect of the changes as well as which factors are contributing factors and which complicates the process and implementation as it is experienced that there is a gap between the planned intervention and the actual implementation.

In order to minimize the gap between a planned intervention and the actual implementation and secure commitment, Dahler-Larsen (2001) has in “From Programme Theory to Constructivism” formulated theory of Program Theory. The idea is that the outcomes of an intervention (program) are continuously evaluated by the stakeholders. Corresponding, Pawson and Tilley (1997) introduce scientific realism as an evaluation paradigm in “Realistic Evaluation” to be used in the evaluation process of interventions. In “Participatory Evaluation” J.C. Green (1997) states that the results of an evaluation or intervention are more likely to be used, if the users, through their participation, have become invested in the process, which thus creates a sense of ownership and commitment.

Methods

Four Danish SMEs are engaged in the project, two IT-companies and two manufacturing companies ranging from 40 to 170 employees. The development project builds on a process model for participatory primary interventions in larger knowledge intensive companies consisting of three phases in which intervention activities are conducted:

1. Assessing the need for a primary intervention in the department or corporation
2. Exploring the work and work place in a collective process
3. Implementing organizational-level changes and continuous evaluation and adjustments

In the first two phases the case companies explore their work in a participatory process in order to clarify what creates enthusiasm and strain in their work using a FishBone Workshop. Based on the collective reflections, managers and employees decide together using Multi-voting, which themes are most important to change and implement. A plan for the intervention is subsequently outlined which can be evaluated continuously.

In the last phase focus is on the “black box” in which the process takes place and transforms changes to results. The managers and employees in each case consequently, partake in the whole intervention, where they, in a collective and collaborative process, re-design their work practices and organizational design and implement the changes. The process is evaluated step by step throughout the intervention by the facilitator. The evaluation thereby makes it possible to identify implementation failures and the changes to be made.

Results

At this point three of the four cases, two departments and one whole company, have completed phase one and two besides one company. The result is at present three local lists of prioritized changes. The top two in each case are presently being implemented as organizational-level changes and the continuous evaluation and adjustments of the supporting factors have been initiated.

The conducted surveys and the first interview round show that a collective process makes a difference to the commitment and that the collective reflections regarding the work processes are eye openers. Each company has also developed a plan for the intervention. During the implementation of the changes of their daily activities these are to be evaluated step by step throughout the intervention and adjustments of the supporting factors are going to be made. The interventions are planned to finish January 2013.

Discussions

It is still an open question whether interventions in SMEs can be conducted by in-house resources without process competences simply by using the present model but it seems like it's possible if the in-house facilitator is trusted and capable of listening besides having an interest in change processes. This we will look into even further in the coming months.

Another important issue which we have to clarify is how organizational-level interventions can be addressed more smoothly in SMEs. Who can and will lift the agenda? So far it is our hypothesis that middle or top management are the target audience for our results and not solely the safety representatives or shop stewards.

Conclusion

At this point the three of the four companies have just initiated the evaluation of their interventions, and the first interviews and surveys have been conducted. The tool appears to be applicable and brings about the expected reflections and supporting changes. It is also evident that the collective reflections and actions is a powerful to secure commitment. In the coming months the use of collective and continuous evaluations will show its worth as an evaluation tool with the aim to minimize the gap between plan and result and clarify the local theory. The interventions are completed during winter 2012 followed by the final analysis.